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The 'poor ones' tell of their torture

CRY OF THE INVISIBLE: Writings From the Homeless and Survivors of Psychiatric Hospitals. Edited by Michael Susko. A Harrison Edward Livingstone Book by the Conservatory Press. 334 pages. $19.95 hard cover. $16.95 soft cover.

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FEW NIGHTMARES can be as horrific as that of finding yourself in confinement without power or rights and forced to live according to a system in which the rules are either never explained or simply changed according to the unchallengeable will of the authorities.

And how much more invidious if you are taught that everything is being done for your benefit and that your proper obligation and one hope of release is to demonstrate with uttermost sincerity your love and appreciation for your captors. It is the stuff of Kafka and Orwell, but it is also, at its worst, the situation of the psychiatric patient, except that in that case the patient must act normally while enduring a steady regimen of drugging and electrical shocks over which he or she has no real control.

By now a great deal has been written about the homeless and about psychiatric patients, some of it by sympathetic and even crusading reformers. But nothing written *about* them reveals their world with anything like the directness of what is written *by* them.

What Michael Susko has done in "Cry of the Invisible" is to perform a most invaluable service for the powerless, the invisible, the forgotten, the unconsulted. He has yielded to *them* the forum of public discourse. It is no less radical and important an act than that. Who, after all, has access to print, to the power and dignity of the written and published word, to the book? The educated, the affluent, the professional — and even these must satisfy the needs of the arbiters of public discourse: the scholarly, commercial and journalistic publishers and editors. It's called free press.

But Susko and his publisher have yielded the floor to those the Bible calls *anawim*, the "poor ones" who are otherwise never heard from. But here we hear them. There are amazing literary riches in this anthology, sometimes as precise and startling as the title of one poem, "Suppertime: or Full Course with Seizure Salad." Among the other poetry in the collection we find the Sylvia Plath-like "Lady Schizophrenia" and its companion "The Angels of Mercy Meet Lady Schizophrenia."

In one untitled poem by D. Cherubini, the poet says, with powerful directness, "I need you to be there for me/ When the razor blade screams." A woman sexually abused as a child fantasizes, in a poem called "What She Thought About at Six (And Had Nightmares About at Thirty)," about escaping from the hated smothering male presence by turning into a big black balloon. Then she could "let all my air out at once/ so I can flit and dart through the room/ . . . like a crazy drunken bumblebee . . ."

There is a great deal of poetry and prose-poetry in "Cry of the Invisible," and it seems clear that there is something finally liberating in sheer imagery for people immersed in an environment of analyses, reports and prescriptions. The anthology in fact includes a set of selections produced in a creative writing class at Sheppard Pratt.

The heart of the book is the series of personal stories of "psychiatric survivors" — some of whom have indeed died since telling their stories. Nothing, I think, can be more telling than Lois' simple report that "When we could manipulate our minds right, we were allowed to get up and put our cotton dresses on," or Jack's testimony that when he asked what the purpose was of the pills he was being given, he was told by the psychiatrist, "They're like a *thought-straightener*." Sometimes the reader is struck by the poignant witness of what it is like, always, to be a "marginal" person, as when Michael P. writes that "Everywhere I go, I feel I make people uncomfortable and make them feel I'm strange. *They want to understand why I'm ruining their experience*" (italics mine).

As the publisher, Harrison Edward Livingstone, testifies (for his, too, is one of these stories), society seems to have a "short fuse" in its concern for people on the margin, and the line from concern to annoyance to hostility is readily crossed.

Livingstone concludes, "We overlook the fact that most paranoids have a good reason for it."

It is important to realize that these writers are not just ex-patients and not just people who need help. It is also true that we need them and that they are our teachers. The editor, publisher and most of the writers of "Cry of the Invisible" are Baltimoreans.

They teach us about a part of Baltimore few of us know.

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